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trading standards law explained

Importing animals

In the guide

Document requirements
- Commercial document
- Import licence
- Health certificate
- Journey logs
- Customs declarations

Equines
Pigs
Cattle
Isolation periods for imported livestock
Pets and non-native species, including zoo residents
- Commercial imports of pets

Further information
Potential impacts of new law
SPS agreement
Trading Standards
In this update
Key legislation

In this guide, the words 'must' or 'must not' are used where there is a legal requirement to do (or not do) something. The word 'should' is used where there is established legal guidance or best practice that is likely to help you avoid breaking the law.

Although the United Kingdom left the European Union (EU) in 2021, certain pieces of legislation (known as 'assimilated law') continue to apply until such time as they are replaced by new UK legislation, revoked or permitted to expire. This means that our guidance still contains references to legislation that originated from the EU.

To fully understand this guidance, it is important to note the difference between the United Kingdom and Great Britain:

- UK: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland
- GB: England, Scotland and Wales

This guidance is for England, Scotland and Wales

When animals are to be imported, all relevant persons must ensure that the animals are correctly identified, in good health and accompanied by the correct documentation. There are also documentation requirements for germplasm and germinal products (semen, ova and embryos).

Document requirements

Imports of live animals and germplasm / germinal products need to come with one or all of the following.

Commercial document

This should be provided by the supplier. It contains the name of the sender, the name of the receiver and details of what is in the consignment.

Import licence

This details the:

- Species / product
- Country of origin
- Port of entry / border inspection post

It may also include specific conditions.

Health certificate

This is an official document that is signed by either an official veterinary surgeon or an authorised officer. It confirms that the import meets the destination country's health requirements. The original certificate (not a copy) must travel with the consignment. The health certificate will contain a unique notification number (UNN); the format of this number will be IMP.GB.2026.1XXXXXX.

Health certificates are required for imports of the following:

- Live animals
- Animal by-products
- High-risk food or feed not of animal origin

Journey logs

These are separate documents that must accompany the consignment, in addition to all the other required documentation. They contain information about the plan for the journey, place of departure and destination, as well as the transporter declaration. For movements of live animals from the EU to or through GB, a journey log is required to be approved by the EU Member State of origin, in addition to a journey log approved by the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA). Two officially approved journey logs

are required for each imported consignment.

Germinal products can only be imported into the UK from businesses approved by the EU to trade with the UK.

Customs declarations

The Customs Declaration Service (CDS) is a database reporting system that enables records to be kept of the movement of goods by sea, air and land. It automatically checks for entry errors on inputs made as part of customs declarations by importers, exporters and other relevant parties.

APHA must be pre-notified, using the Import of Products, Animals, Food and Feed System (IPAFFS), of all imports of live animals and animal by-products (including germplasm) from the EU to GB. Pre-notification of the consignment can be done up to 30 days in advance, but must be made no later than one working day before arrival. A copy of the health certificate, where required for a particular consignment, must be added to the relevant import notification on IPAFFS.

Equines

The word 'horses' is used here to refer to all 'equidae' or 'equine animal(s)', which are defined in assimilated Regulation (EU) 2015/262 *laying down rules pursuant to Directives 90/427/EEC and 2009/156/EC as regards the methods for the identification of equidae (Equine Passport Regulation)* as "wild or domesticated soliped mammals of all species within the genus *Equus* of the family Equidae, and their crosses" - for example, horse, donkey, mule, hinny (jennet), zebra, Przewalski, or their crosses.

Horses may be subject to pre-import testing, although certain exemptions exist.

Horses registered with a national branch of an international body (IB) for sporting or competition purposes, or an EU-approved studbook, do not require pre-import testing when being imported from the EU or Norway. Any horses not able to claim the testing exemption are required to be tested for equine viral arteritis and equine infectious anaemia.

The owner of any horse entering GB without a horse passport issued by an IB must apply for a horse passport within 30 days of entering the country. Until the passport is issued, no change of ownership may take place. Horses entering GB with an identification document may be considered valid if they comply with set conditions.

The horse will need to be identified in accordance with GB rules and will require a microchip when being issued with a passport. If the horse has an existing microchip detected, it may be possible to use this identification and update the existing passport. Any passport so issued must state that the horse is not intended for human consumption.

Pigs

Any pigs imported to GB from anywhere outside of GB must have an ear tag or tattoo applied within 30 days of arrival containing the letters 'UK', the herd mark of the destination premises and the letter 'F'. Pigs moved direct to a licensed slaughterhouse and slaughtered within 30 days of arrival are exempt from this requirement.

Cattle

See the information about registering cattle imported or moved into England or Wales on the GOV.UK website and/or the import information in the Scottish Government's guidance on livestock identification and traceability.

Isolation periods for imported livestock

Cattle, sheep, goats and pigs imported for breeding and production must be taken without delay from the border control post (BCP) to the holding of destination and kept there for at least 30 days, unless consigned to a slaughterhouse. Animals intended for immediate slaughter must be conveyed without delay from the BCP to the slaughterhouse where they should be slaughtered as soon as possible, but at least within five working days.

Poultry and ratites are subject to being kept on the destination premises for six weeks or until the day of slaughter. The isolation period may be reduced to three weeks as a result of negative disease test results.

Some other species may need to stay at the destination premises for 48 hours.

Consignments may need post-import checks; APHA will provide appropriate advice on this.

Pets and non-native species, including zoo residents

When importing cats, dogs and ferrets into GB, one or more of the following documents are required:

- Animal health certificate
- Pet passport
- GB pet health certificate

The documentary requirements are dependent on the country of origin. Full details on pet importation are available on the GOV.UK website.

Commercial imports of pets

When importing dogs, cats or ferrets that are going to be sold, rehomed or have their ownership transferred, this movement will be considered a commercial import. If you are importing more than five cats, dogs and/or ferrets, and/or you are unable to travel to accompany the pets five days before they arrive in GB, this would also be considered a commercial import.

Commercial imports of pets, as well as many zoo and lab animals, are subject to Balai rules, which cover what is required to move certain animals (and their germplasm) that are not traditional livestock. Conditions of travel also include tapeworm treatment in dogs, rabies vaccinations and microchipping.

Imports of reptiles, invertebrates (except bees, molluscs and crustaceans) and amphibians (except salamanders) must:

- Be notified to IPAFFS at least one working day before arrival
- Have an exporter's declaration regarding fitness to travel
- Be accompanied by a document detailing the origin of the consignment, the species, the number of

occupants and the destination

Any animal listed by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) requires a permit or certificate for import. This documentation is also required for movements between GB and NI.

The target operating model import risk category for the commodity being imported must be identified and the sanitary and phytosanitary rules for the relevant import risk category must be followed. Full details on risk categories are available on the GOV.UK website.

Further information

More detailed information on transiting animals and animal products through GB and live animal imports can be found on the GOV.UK website. See also GOV.UK's collection of guidance on importing live animals or animal products.

The APHA Vet Gateway provides more detailed information regarding imports of live animal and genetic material.

Potential impacts of new law

The Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Act 2025 received Royal Assent on 2 December 2025. The main provisions of the Act are yet to come into effect; this will happen on an as-yet unspecified date.

When it comes into force, the Act will (among other things) prohibit bringing the following into a specified part of the UK:

- Dogs or cats that are below the age of six months
- Dogs or cats that are more than 42 days pregnant
- Dogs or cats that have been mutilated

SPS agreement

The UK Government is in the process of forming a new sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement with the EU, which will cover the trade and movement of plants, plant products, animals, animal products, food and feed. It is expected to take effect in mid-2027.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has produced guidance to help businesses prepare.

Trading Standards

For more information on the work of Trading Standards Services and the possible consequences of not abiding by the law, please see 'Trading Standards: powers, enforcement and penalties'.

In this update

Information about the SPS agreement added.

Last reviewed / updated: November 2026

Key legislation

- Rabies (Importation of Dogs, Cats and Other Mammals) Order 1974
- Non-Commercial Movement of Pet Animals Order 2011
- Trade in Animals and Related Products Regulations 2011
- Assimilated Regulation (EU) 2015/262 *laying down rules pursuant to Directives 90/427/EEC and 2009/156/EC as regards the methods for the identification of equidae (Equine Passport Regulation)*
- Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Act 2025

Please note

This information is intended for guidance; only the courts can give an authoritative interpretation of the law.

The guide's 'Key legislation' links go to the legislation.gov.uk website. The site usually updates the legislation to include any amendments made to it. However, this is not always the case. Information on all changes made to legislation can be found by following the above links and clicking on the 'More Resources' tab.

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